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Tax-Related Identity Theft on the Rise: How to Protect Yourself

Tax-related identity theft is increasing, and tax season gives individuals even more reason to take steps to protect themselves.

Identity thieves can get hold of your personal information by stealing your tax return from a mailbox, getting it by email, posing as an Internal Revenue Service ([IRS](#)) or Franchise Tax Board ([FTB](#)) official, and in other ways.

Tax returns can contain social security numbers, bank account and routing numbers, mortgage loan details, and other important personal information. Thieves can use the information contained in tax returns to apply for refunds in your name and commit other fraudulent acts.

Because of the lag time between filing your taxes and receiving a refund, months may pass before you discover your identity has been stolen.

Here are some ways to protect yourself:

- [File your federal](#) and [state returns](#) electronically and have your refund deposited directly into your bank account. Completing both steps electronically lessens the likelihood of identity theft.
- Do not leave tax documents exposed on your desk at home or at work. This sensitive information can be quickly photocopied or photographed with a cell phone camera.
- If you receive a suspicious email claiming to be from the IRS, [forward it](#) to the IRS. For suspicious emails claiming to be from FTB, do not click on links or respond to the emails. Contact [FTB](#).
- Be sure your tax preparer is in good standing with the Better Business Bureau, State Board of Accountancy, State Bar Association, and the Attorney General's Office. Consider these [helpful hints](#) and also using free, IRS/FTB-approved tax preparation software.
- If someone asks for personal information to send you a refund check, do not provide it. Both the IRS and the FTB already know where to send your refund.

Identity thieves continue to find new ways to steal personal information. Tax-related identity theft cases doubled last year, according to the IRS. Taking simple [steps](#) will ensure that you are not a victim.

This bulletin is one in a series to provide information to taxpayers that may be of assistance during the 2012 tax filing season.